

Shift focus of aid to urban poverty: UN

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By Denis Peters

Australian aid donors have been urged to get real about overseas development aid by focusing on poor people in cities, rather than rural areas.

Policies targeting the urban poor are more likely to help Australia's neighbours such as Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, a launch of the United Nations Population Fund update was told.

Next year, for the first time, more than half the world's population – or 3.3 billion people – would be living in cities, the fund's state of the world population 2007 report said.

By 2030, this is expected to swell to nearly five billion.

Federal Labor frontbencher Bob McMullan, representing the parliamentary group for population and development, said the report challenged assumptions underpinning international development assistance.

"A significant amount of international and Australian intellectual debate and policy deal-

ing with international development assistance ... is focusing on rural development.

"That's not to say we should now stop focusing on rural development because it is an area where there is and continues to be a massive amount of poverty.

"This is to say we need to re-examine the priorities, the country's strategy that we are developing to make sure that they are not locked in an old paradigm and missing the significant increase in global poverty located in the cities in developing countries."

Mr McMullan said such a strategy presented new challenges for policymakers.

"Not so much in the countries in our immediate region in the Pacific, but in some of the Asian countries in our region and in some of the African countries where poverty is greatest ... the donor governments are not necessarily so enthusiastic about activities donors might wish to take in the cities."

Issues like climate change and the sexual and reproductive health of young women were central to managing poverty in cities.

The fund representative to Vietnam, Australian Ian Howie, said he saw the struggle of people in Hanoi daily, but he also saw hope.

"It's true that cities concentrate poverty. But as this year's report shows, urban areas also represent the best hope poor people have of escaping it.

"To embrace the potential of urban growth we need a concerted international effort that accepts and takes a proactive and pre-emptive approach to planning for urban growth."

Australia, with more than 90 per cent of its population living in towns and cities; understood the importance of urbanisation.

"You, as either members of Parliament or leaders of our community, have a key role to play in planning for the future.

"Do the policies that you are drafting now or advising about acknowledge the need for sustainable, long-term, urban solutions that go beyond your terms in office?

"What are you saying to Honiara and Port Vila, whose populations will double in less than 18 years?"

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